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Reclaiming a Biblical View for Agriculture

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Reclaiming a Biblical View for Agriculture

Abstract

"A study of modern approaches to the Christian mission reveals a longstanding debate between an evangelical approach that advocates a 'word' ministry and an ecumenical view that argues for a 'deed' emphasis."

Posting about agricultural mission work from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/reclaiming-a-biblical-view-for-agriculture/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at [Dordt College](#).

Reclaiming a Biblical View for Agriculture

 [inallthings.org/reclaiming-a-biblical-view-for-agriculture/](https://allthings.org/reclaiming-a-biblical-view-for-agriculture/)

Wayne Kobes

At an Agricultural Missions Conference held at ECHO in North Fort Myers, Florida, one of the conferees, a Christian development worker, shared his personal frustration. He had committed years of work to help a small group of people in Latin America improve their nutrition through more responsible farming techniques. He stated, “In the name of Jesus Christ, we work hard to minister to the hungry and malnourished. But we’re always made to feel like ‘second-class missionaries’ by those who are doing ‘real missionary work,’ by those ‘preaching the gospel of salvation.’” Others in the small group joined their voices to his, making it clear that this was no isolated experience.

That conversation has come back to me repeatedly. How could those feeding the hungry – in the name of Jesus Christ – be seen as concerning themselves with secondary issues? How could they be regarded as people engaged in something other than bringing the good news of Jesus Christ? And yet, such a view was obviously widespread!

But should we be surprised? A study of modern approaches to the Christian mission reveals a longstanding debate between an evangelical approach that advocates a “word” ministry and an ecumenical view that argues for a “deed” emphasis. A helpful overview of the two positions and the confusion and damage they have brought to Christian missions can be found in David Bosch’s *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*.

Today one can still find those who vehemently defend either the word or the deed emphasis almost to the exclusion of the other, but such people are fortunately a small minority. Most people involved in Christian missions realize that it’s not an *either/or*, but a *both/and*, even if the emphasis falls somewhat on one side or the other. Today, most people would argue for the integration of word and deed in order to faithfully bring the gospel to the world. Of course, this gives more validity to the work of Christians involved in activities such as agricultural missions, community development, medical assistance, and hunger relief. It has even begun to legitimize the idea of biblical holism in agriculture and other areas of human activity, which had been seen as secular (far removed from matters of faith) in the past.

In many ways, we have moved closer to a biblical understanding of the gospel and of life, closer to a worldview that calls Christians to “walk in God’s ways” in every area of their lives. And yet, a fundamental problem remains. To think in terms of integrating word and deed, faith and life, or Christianity and agriculture still leaves us caught in an unbiblical dualism that prevents the wholehearted, joyful service that God expects of his daughters and sons.

In a significant book, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth*, George Eldon Ladd traces the origins of this dualistic interpretation of Christianity to Greek philosophical influences that were all too readily embraced by the Christian church in the past and unwittingly assumed today. He contrasts this widespread interpretation of the Christian faith to the teachings of the Old Testament, stating, “The Greek idea that the material world is the sphere of evil and a burden or a hindrance to the soul is alien to the Old Testament.”¹

Alien or not, it is this Greek dualism that has been uncritically accepted, or often simply assumed, by generations of Christians. And this has had dire consequences. This unbiblical worldview has functioned like a pair of glasses that Christians wear as they read Scripture and look at the world God created. Rather than correcting our sin-weakened eyes so that we can better see what God has revealed in his creation, though, these improperly ground lenses have further distorted our vision. We look at Scripture, but we don’t see clearly. We survey God’s creation, but we fail to perceive. As a result, false problems and crippling tensions arise in every part of the landscape we survey. Are we to preach the gospel or minister to physical needs? Should our emphasis be on word and deed? Are we to be directed by the missionary mandate of Matthew 28 or the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28? Do we feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty as a way of getting a hearing for the gospel message? Do we encourage our youth to enter

“kingdom service” or to succeed in secular fields?

Where does such an unbiblical dualism leave Christians involved in agriculture? At best, it relegates the Christian agriculturalist to the position of a son or daughter of the King: one who seeks to serve God in that which is temporal, passing, and of little eternal significance. At worst, it views the Christian agriculturalist as a person who has become sidetracked from the significant, eternal quest and become occupied with what is ultimately irrelevant. To be sure, some Christians are involved in agriculture, a legitimate enterprise that puts food on the table – but the real meaning of life must be found elsewhere: in Christian worship and devotion, in what God is really concerned with.

Deep down I think that most of us sense that there is something inherently wrong with this kind of formulation, with this tension that exists within the Christian community. And yet, too often it continues to plague, confuse, and handicap us as we seek to do Christ’s work in today’s world. The only way to disable this tension is to go to Scripture and listen to its life-changing, worldview-shaping message. In doing so, we must take care to avoid the temptation to focus only on those verses that reinforce our own particular understanding of the mission God has entrusted to his people while being blind to a fuller vision of the kingdom of God. In fact, it is precisely this bigger picture, this overarching message of God’s Word, that breaks through the tensions and corrects the distortions in the church’s understanding of her calling. The central thrust of Scripture calls us to life, individually and communally, that is wholly lived in service of God, the Creator King. This bigger picture, this motif of Scripture, must be constantly before us, shaping our thinking and our acting before the face of God.

This article is from an excerpt from the book, [Biblical Holism and Agriculture-Cultivating Our Roots](#) by David J. Evans, Ronald J. Vos, and Keith P. Wright (WCL Books, 2003). Republished with permission from [WCL Books](#).

Footnotes

1. 1968, 31 [↩](#)